

For Many Audiences: Developing Public Programs at the National Archives of Australia

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In this article I explore the role of public programs at the National Archives of Australia in order to highlight key issues facing archives as we endeavour to make our organisations and our collections more accessible to wider audiences. Public programs, which include exhibitions, education and events programs, publications and websites, fulfil an educational purpose that goes beyond the marketing of archival institutions. Our products contribute to the education of the population so that they understand their history, their society and their role as citizens in a democracy. I argue that good public programs must focus on the audience and speak to them in entertaining, engaging and challenging ways.

Over the past ten years archives around the world have altered their relationships with their public audiences. They have reinvented programs for existing customers and developed new ways to make their collections appreciated by people who in the past were not even aware that the archives existed, much less that they contained records that document both society and the lives of individuals. These changes are reflected in the archival literature, with an increase during the 1990s in the number of articles exploring the role of outreach and public programs for archival institutions, particularly government archives.

The National Archives of Australia has been part of this transformation. International archivists who visit the Archives, existing audiences including researchers and staff in government departments, as well as the new audiences we are now reaching, all acknowledge the radical change that has taken place in the public profile of the organisation since 1990. This paper will outline the way the Archives has redefined and repositioned itself, changing its relationships with the public audiences for whom it delivers a broad range of programs. It is always difficult to decide which projects to undertake and I hope this account of the approach adopted by the National Archives provides evidence of experience that may be useful for other organisations as they embark on the vitally important work of making archives matter to society.

Defining public programs

In writing and talking about programs for the public, archivists often use the term *outreach*. At the National Archives we prefer the term *public programs*. This is not only because it is the term used by other national cultural institutions but also because it focuses explicitly on the public. The key to successful public programs is to understand the audiences for whom they are developed. Different archives will target different markets for their products, according to their objectives, but everyone needs to start by putting themselves in their audience's shoes. Increasingly today, community consultation and inclusivity are also an essential part of the equation. This is a two-way process that engages audiences in the development of the program from the very beginning when decisions are made about what to do, until the very end when the program is evaluated and its success is measured. Without looking at what we do from the audience's point of view, archives risk missing their mark.

Public programs should support the mission or outcome which the archives identifies as its purpose. This will enable the organisation to decide which audiences to communicate with and what ideas to communicate. After these decisions have been made, the particular programs to be undertaken can be explored. There are usually several options and deciding whether to develop an exhibition, a website, a publication, an education program, a friends of the archives group, a series of events, or a media campaign will depend on a range of factors. These include not only the message and the target audience, but also the resources available – time, money, and access to technical and other professional expertise.

Public programs for a national archives

National archives are often referred to as the nation's memory and their role in revealing and interpreting evidence about the past involves developing a wide range of cultural products and programs for many different audiences. Public programs make cultural

institutions more accessible to more people in a variety of ways. They are developed primarily for audiences who are not engaged in research using the collection. The same individual member of the public may belong to several separate audiences, such as the 'researchers' audience and the audience consisting of exhibition visitors. Public programs may also result in a member of the 'exhibition visitors' audience becoming a researcher. However, public programs target markets that are much wider than the researchers who make direct use of the collection through the reference services.

The broad objective of public programs at the National Archives is to educate the general public. We want our audiences to understand that the Archives collection, which documents the relationship between the Commonwealth government and the people, contains records that are central to our history and relevant to all of the population, not just researchers. Because the role of archives as a cornerstone of democracy is not widely recognised in Australia, we are also endeavouring to inform our audiences of the significance of the records we keep as part of the task of educating citizens so that they can participate in society in the active, involved, well-informed way that democracy depends upon. Everyone living in Australia should understand the contribution the Archives and its collection make towards a greater understanding of history and society, enabling the population to participate actively in the Australian system of government and make educated political decisions. In addition to this public function of the Archives, the programs that we present should explain the personal significance of the collection, its role in enabling individuals to provide evidence of their rights and entitlements and to understand the history of their community, their family and their own experiences.

Clearly this broad educational objective extends beyond the marketing function carried out by public programs. Of course our exhibitions, websites, publications, and education and events programs all help to raise the profile of the National Archives and to promote the role of archives in general. That is an important outcome but it is not the primary purpose of our public programs. Fundamental to our approach at the National Archives is the commitment to an agenda that extends beyond marketing the organisation and involves interpreting our collection to make it more accessible to the widest possible audiences. In this respect we share a common purpose with museums and libraries.

Repositioning the Archives: Becoming a national cultural institution

Over the past ten years the National Archives has transformed itself from being an organisation with a primary purpose of providing services to government and government agencies to becoming a national cultural institution with multiple functions. The process of repositioning the Archives involved a number of changes

including the establishment of a Public Programs section which began by producing high-quality exhibitions and publications. This has been well documented by Helen Nosworthy in her 1994 article in *The Records Continuum*, 'Reaching Out: A Core Program for Australian Archives', where she argued:

By finally recognising that a program of outreach activities was just as essential as appraisal, control, description, preservation, storage and reference services Australian Archives has embarked on a new era.¹

By 2002, exhibitions and publications, together with the more recent developments such as websites, events and education programs, are firmly established as part of the core business of the National Archives.

A key stage in repositioning the organisation as a national cultural institution took place in 1998 when the Archives moved to new premises in a historic building with a high-profile location within Canberra's parliamentary triangle. The building opened in 1927 as a companion to the original Parliament House. For 70 years it was home to the General Post Office and other government departments. Many of the records in our collection began their life in our building. Now beautifully refurbished, it houses three galleries, an education centre, spaces for public lectures and events, a visitors lounge, orientation centre and reading room, as well as offices for staff. In the industrial suburb of Mitchell, where the reading room was previously situated, the Archives continues to store and manage its Canberra collection in the purpose-built repository. To underscore the significance of the move to a location close to the other national cultural institutions, the Australian Archives changed its name to the National Archives of Australia, in line with institutions such as the National Library, the National Gallery and the National Museum. The new location and new name have greatly enhanced the way our public, government and professional audiences perceive the Archives.

Creating public programs for a national cultural institution has involved recruiting staff with specialist qualifications and experience in marketing and design, journalism, curating exhibitions, events management, writing and editing publications, website development, preparing and promoting education products for schools, and managing front of house operations. The Archives has learnt a great deal from museums, galleries and libraries about how to plan its public programs, manage successful projects and understand its audiences.

Making the most of the Centenary of Federation

In the mid-1990s the Archives decided to embark on a number of high-quality projects to celebrate the birth of the nation. The Centenary of Federation was identified by George Nichols, Director-General of the Archives 1990–2000, as a great opportunity for the organisation, celebrating as it did the establishment of the federal government that creates the records in our collection. In the lead-up to the centenary year, the

Archives collaborated with Global Vision Productions and Australian Heritage Projects to create a CD-ROM, *One Destiny!* which was widely distributed to schools in Australia in 1997. (A Centenary edition of the CD-ROM was produced in 2001 by Global Vision in conjunction with the Curriculum Corporation. This version, including additional teacher support materials for upper primary and middle secondary students, was distributed free to all primary and secondary schools in Australia.) In 1998 the Archives published *Federation: The Guide to Records*, in time to assist others to plan their Federation celebrations. This guide included records in the Archives' own collection as well as in other archives, libraries, museums, galleries and historical societies across Australia. Through these two publications, the Archives facilitated access to records used for many centenary projects around the country and provided a wealth of material for journalists writing about Federation and its significance.

The Centenary of Federation was also worthwhile for the Archives because the National Council for the Centenary of Federation provided significant funding for history and education projects. The Archives was successful in receiving three major grants from the Council. Two of them enabled the organisation to undertake significant collaborations with other organisations. The *Belonging* touring exhibition was developed with the National Library and the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria. All the State and Northern Territory archives collaborated with the National Archives to create the *Documenting a Democracy* website. The third grant funded the production of a teachers resource kit, *1901 and All That*, which was sent to all high schools in Australia for use by middle secondary students.

The National Council for the Centenary of Federation also provided support for projects as part of its events and celebrations program. The Archives received funding from this program to establish the Federation Gallery. The new gallery includes the *Charters of Our Nation* exhibition which displays seven of Australia's key constitutional documents, including our 'birth certificates': the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act* and its Royal Commission of Assent, and the Letters Patent establishing the Office of Governor-General. The *Constitutional Alphabet* is a light-hearted audiovisual program in the Federation Gallery which makes the Constitution more accessible to school audiences and other visitors. Jack Morton Worldwide, the consultant company who worked with Archives staff to produce the video, contributed significant sponsorship support for this production. Sponsorship is a form of funding that the Archives has made use of on several occasions as opportunities such as this have arisen.

It is impossible for the Archives to communicate with all Australians through one program. A rare opportunity for contact with most of the population occurred in 2001. The Centenary of Federation Census Time Capsule required every Australian household to read the question on their census form asking people to tick the box to

ensure that their personal details would be kept for at least 100 years in the National Archives. As part of the promotional campaign for this exercise, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Archives produced material explaining the role of the Archives in keeping information safe and secure for future generations. At the time of writing the results of this exercise have not yet been released, but even if not everyone ticked the 'yes' box, at least they read about the Archives. This was one small step towards greater public recognition for the organisation.

Knowing our audiences

Successful public programs depend on reaching identified target markets. This is achieved through careful analysis of communication objectives, and ongoing research to identify and understand particular audiences. For the National Archives to achieve its aim to be known, understood and valued by all Australians, the whole population is the audience. It is never possible to communicate with everyone, so we need to divide our audiences into smaller more manageable groups or target markets. There are many ways to do this, using categories such as personal interests, leisure activities, level of education, age, gender, place of residence, etc.

The Archives External Communication Policy identifies several key market segments for public programs by defining them as consumers: exhibition visitors; readers of our publications; website visitors; people attending our events; tourists; primary, secondary and tertiary students and teachers; and the media. Teachers and journalists play key roles because they operate as multipliers, assisting the Archives to reach much wider audiences than we can contact directly ourselves.

Working with the media

Journalists and celebrities are crucial players in educating the general public about the Archives. To attract the attention of the journalist audience, who communicate about us with their own wider audiences, the Archives needs to be news. Exhibition openings, book launches and public events, usually involving celebrities, are the major form of news we provide for journalists. These events receive good coverage with stories appearing on radio, television and in newspapers. This in turn attracts the audiences who consume our products.

The Archives also makes use of the media by providing content for radio, television and newspapers. A weekly series of photographs of Canberra, requesting readers to identify the people and places depicted, is equally popular with the journalist who writes the column, the readers who provide the captions and the Archives which becomes better known and appreciated as a result. Archives staff have provided short pieces for television programs such as the ABC's *Snapshot* which focuses on cultural programs, usually for local viewers. Recently ABC Radio has introduced monthly

series or programs where staff talk about the collection, coming events and the nature of archival work. The Archives has provided special training for staff appearing in the media. Each of these media opportunities requires us to prepare for a particular audience, putting ourselves in their shoes and ensuring that our stories connect to their lives.

Ten years ago the release of Cabinet records that have reached the age of 30 years produced only limited media coverage. Since we greatly enhanced the service we provide for journalists to accompany this annual release, news about the Archives release of Cabinet records appears every January on television, radio and in newspapers throughout the land, from prime time broadcasts in capital cities to articles in many country papers. It has become a ritual for political journalists to visit the Archives every December for a media briefing from an academic historian and a politician or a public servant who was a key player in the events of 30 years before. Journalists also receive a package of embargoed materials including copies of key documents. Similar opportunities are provided through releases of the Privileges Committee records and the 50-year-old Cabinet notebooks.

There has been a marked increase in the amount of coverage received by the Archives for these releases since we discovered more about the needs of this audience of busy journalists. We provide them with a range of well-digested material including transcripts and digitised copies of the records on our website. Journalists acknowledge the Archives as the source of their stories which bring our collection to life by connecting the records to people's lives.

The education sector

Teachers as well as journalists have been identified as a key multiplier audience for the Archives, essential for communicating with the wider audience of students. Esther Robinson's article in this issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* explains the use of our teachers resource kits and describes the evaluation process that was such a vital factor in producing successful kits that are useful in the classroom.²

The Archives communicates directly with students and teachers through the programs presented in its education centre in the national building in Canberra. There are several types of programs, currently restricted to secondary students because of limited resources and considerable demand. The Federation Gallery with the founding documents of the nation and *The Constitutional Alphabet* video is the focus for one program.

The Treasures Gallery exhibits and the temporary exhibitions provide the basis for other programs. When Archives exhibitions travel to galleries and museums around Australia, they are accompanied by educational material that forms the basis for activities undertaken by venue staff with school audiences.

Tertiary students and their teachers are another growing market. This audience, like school students, demands quality website content. Because of the limited resources in this fast-growing sector, the primary focus of the website team at the Archives at present is to update our two websites, the National Archives website (www.naa.gov.au) and *Documenting a Democracy* (www.foundingdocs.gov.au), following the recommendations made in the recently completed evaluation reports. The new Prime Ministers website, due to be launched later this year, is another major undertaking that will provide educational content for a range of audiences including schools, universities and adults engaged in lifelong learning. There is scope for further work in developing online programs for teachers and students, which the newly enhanced Archives education team is currently investigating.

Exhibition visitors

The primary aim of National Archives exhibitions is to educate visitors about their history. In presenting the exhibition *John Curtin: A Man of Peace, a Time of War*, for example, our key objective was to engage visitors in reflecting upon the role John Curtin played in Australian political history, particularly during World War Two. Helping visitors to understand the kinds of valuable documents, photographs and other material held by the Archives was an important secondary aim. Our exhibitions are intended for audiences who share interests with museum visitors, the majority of whom do not want or need to carry out their own research using the Archives. For some visitors, however, the exhibition opens a window into the collection and they pursue their interests further by conducting their own research through the reference service.

Our exhibitions might challenge or even modify visitors' assumptions about Australian history, as in the case of our exhibition and publication about the Stolen Generation, *Between Two Worlds*. Alternatively we might remind audiences of the past in a lighthearted, even nostalgic fashion as we did in the exhibition *Canberra's Early Years*. Both education and entertainment have their place.

Since 1993 the Archives has developed 17 exhibitions. Ten of them have toured across the country, seven of these with financial assistance from the Visions of Australia travelling exhibitions scheme. About a million visitors have seen our exhibitions in 46 different museums and galleries in all states and the Northern Territory. Ten of these venues have hosted more than one Archives exhibition since 1993, bringing the total number of openings to 67. The exhibitions range in size from larger projects such as *An Ideal City?* and *Belonging* (each occupying about 300 square metres) to a typical touring show like *Signed, Sealed, Delivered: When the Post Office was King* (about 200 square metres) that opened in our own gallery in Canberra and then toured nationally. Smaller exhibitions, such as the 30 framed photographs and an audiovisual exhibit that make up *Caught in the Rear View Mirror with Roy and HG*, travel to smaller

venues where the strict conservation and security conditions required for original records are not available.

The National Archives now accepts that exhibitions are an important feature of our core work. With ten years of experience behind us, it is time to review the program and its results. There are many questions to consider. The lively debates about how a national institution should interpret and present Australian history that have accompanied the opening of the new National Museum of Australia are relevant to the Archives.³

Within the museum community there is constant investigation about how to interpret the past, how to involve communities in the curating of exhibitions, and how to avoid both elitism and dumbing down. Unfortunately, little of this exciting debate occurs within the archives community. This is something that needs to be redressed. Public programs staff at the National Archives participate actively in Museums Australia, the professional organisation for people working in museums and related cultural institutions. Archivists need to join the conversation with museums and libraries, investigating ways to create better exhibitions.

Archives must adopt and also adapt the practices of museums to interpret their collections through exhibitions for popular audiences. There are many issues to consider and there are many different ways to develop a good exhibition that is both accessible and challenging. The criteria for a good archives exhibition is not any different from other exhibitions. We need to evaluate our captioning conventions with our audiences to ensure that we provide appropriate information in a style that is easy to understand.

It is essential to display original documents. The *Treasures from the World's Great Libraries* exhibition that recently drew huge crowds at the National Library, for example, clearly shows that people are thrilled to be in the presence of the real thing. Sometimes the original cannot survive the rigours of touring and that will require the use of replacements or as a last resort, copies. When an exhibition goes on the road for years as some of our exhibitions do, it must include some facsimiles. How does this alter the visitor's experience? Archivists are particularly challenged by the nature of our collections which include few three-dimensional objects and we need to find new ways to solve the interpretation problems facing curators who develop exhibitions based on two-dimensional exhibits, many of them wordy or even illegible documents.

How much should we spend on electronic or mechanical interactives, audiovisual programs, oral histories and elaborate constructions to support the exhibits? We know that design is not just decoration, it plays a central role in constructing meaning and contributing to the visitor's experience. Finding the right designer for each job is a crucial factor in achieving success. The Archives has its own in-house graphic design team but usually engages a specialist consultant designer for each major new exhibition.

We need to keep rediscovering our audiences and the ways we present exhibitions for them and with them. Learning from fellow cultural workers about how visitors behave, what they want and how they respond to our exhibitions assists us in this process. We aim to educate our visitors by challenging them and enabling them to see the world differently as a result of the way we interpret our collections. They can also educate us if we give them the chance. This requires high-quality communication, teamwork, project management, creativity, interpretation skills and the capacity to engage our audiences emotionally by revealing the stories hidden within the records we keep.

Audiences for our public events

National Archives events are presented for thousands of participants around Australia each year. The typical talks and tours of a decade ago, which usually explained to a small community group what archivists do and revealed what the inside of a repository looks like, have been transformed into a broader range of offerings with far wider appeal. Among the most successful community activities in Canberra are the program of January talks, held each year to accompany the release of Cabinet records. Well-known commentators are invited to speak about aspects of Australian life 30 years ago – Margaret Fulton on food in 1970, Michael McKernan on politics, with others looking at advertising, music, fashion, and the media. The 2001 program of monthly talks ‘Where to now Australia?’ is being followed by a similar series in 2002 entitled ‘Where’s the passion?’ Audiences flock to hear well-known people explore aspects of Australian politics and society and the discussion following the talks is as lively as the talks themselves. Such events are creating a new role for the Archives as a place for public debate about key issues of the day. The large number of participants as well as their positive feedback clearly indicates the community need for such activities.

Transforming our relationship with an existing audience: Family historians

Family history organisations are vitally important to the Archives because their use and promotion of the collection make it accessible to thousands of people across the country. While our reference service provides access to the collection for individual genealogy researchers (many of whom make the records available to others in their family), our public programs operate in partnership with the hardworking executive members of family history organisations. This is another example of the Archives recognising a multiplier group who can assist us to communicate widely with a key market.

Each year our State Office staff travel with colleagues from state government archives and libraries, visiting regional centres where they deliver talks to family and local history groups. Besides the hundreds who attend the talks, thousands of people hear about our collections, publications and services on local radio or read about them in the local paper. Hundreds of genealogists flock to the annual Family History Fair held

at the Archives in collaboration with the Heraldry and Genealogy Society of Canberra. In 2001 ABC Radio provided an outside broadcast to enhance the event with live interviews from staff and researchers. Closer collaboration with family history societies throughout the country is assisting the National Archives to promote the use of immigration, defence and other records that document the life and work of millions of Australians.

One of our most successful publications was produced for family historians. In 1998 the Archives and Hale and Iremonger co-published *Finding Families: The Guide to the National Archives of Australia for Genealogists*. The Research Guide series also includes a number of titles of interest to family historians. Articles about family history research into our collection are included in our newsletter *Memento* that appears three times a year. As well as producing our own publications for this market, we also publish articles about our services in genealogy societies' journals and websites. The Archives has been fortunate to receive critical feedback from key players in the family history community, keen to see us perform more effectively for this audience. This feedback is shaping our plans to enhance the products and services we provide for family historians in the future.

Measuring success

How should archivists gauge the success of our public programs? Before we can assess results, we need clearly defined objectives and rigorous measurement methodologies. This is not easy to achieve but again the museum profession offers invaluable support. Front-end, formative and summative evaluation are now well-established as part of sound museum practice and the National Archives regularly undertakes these activities, assisted by consultants and expert advice from members of the Museums Australia Evaluation Special Interest Group.

A broad indicator of the impact of National Archives programs on the general public is provided through the nation-wide telephone surveys that are conducted every three years to measure general awareness of the Archives amongst the population. Between 1995 when the first survey was carried out and 1998 when the second study took place, the number of people with a basic knowledge of the Archives increased from 66% to 75% of the population.

That percentage remained stable over the next three years, but there was an increase of 5% in the number of people who knew a little and 1% increase in the percentage of Australians who knew a lot about the National Archives. This indicates that there has been a general strengthening of awareness of the Archives amongst the population. Much still remains to be done to make the Archives as well-known as our other national cultural institutions.

Conclusion

The positive responses to the range of projects the Archives has provided for the public over the past ten years demonstrate that a diverse program for many different audiences is essential if the organisation is to fulfil its role as a national cultural institution. This account of our operations is inevitably selective. It is not possible here to cover all the programs that we are undertaking, nor have I addressed all the issues.

The changes at the Archives are also taking place in other archival institutions in Australia and around the world. Public programs are increasingly accepted as core business for archives and discussion about this aspect of our work appears more frequently in the literature of our profession. We look forward to participating in lively debate about the nature of public programs for archives, exploring how we decide what to do, how we find the resources we require and how we assess our success. All of this discussion must start with our audiences and finish with the contribution our organisations make towards building a better society.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Helen Nosworthy, 'Reaching Out: A Core Program for Australian Archives', in Sue McKemish and Michael Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives' First Fifty Years*, Ancora Press in assoc. with Australian Archives, Clayton, Vic., 1994, p. 70.
- 2 Esther Robinson, 'Archives in the Classroom: The Development and Evaluation of National Archives Teachers' Resources', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 30, no. 1, May 2002, pp. 18–29.
- 3 For example, Keith Windschuttle, 'How Not to Run a Museum: People's History at the Postmodern Museum', *Quadrant*, September 2001, pp. 11–19.